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**Vulture Significance in Ogoni Culture**

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**Abstract**

This study explained the spiritual and social significance of vulture in Ogoni culture. It also explained how the use of vulture to refer to human beings and its characteristics became sources of social relations and conflicts in Ogoni culture. It adopted both the anthropological and sociological approaches. Findings from the study revealed that vulture is used as a symbol of ancestors in Ogoni traditional religion and the people tolerate the bird. It is also used as social slang to signify group of people circling around something as a vulture would do. During the movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP), some pro-government chiefs and elites who form committees to aggressively prevent non-members from joining or following them to enjoy government patronage were branded vultures by some MOSOP members, describing them as scavengers that survive on others as prey. This became a source of social conflict. The mere identification of pro-government Ogoni people as vulture, made them vulnerable and threatened in Ogoniland hence, they sought for government protection which sent troops that collided with Mosop activists. This study recommended among others that references to vulture in Ogoni culture should be done with particular consideration of its spiritual and social significance to avoid social

conflict. The ways to peace and harmonious living in Ogoni land are tolerance, avoidance of misinterpretation and inappropriate use of the term vulture to literary refer to human Being in both spiritual and social matters.

### **Introduction**

The Ogonis are indigenous people with their predilections and idiosyncrasies. They are located on the northeast fringe of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Ogoni consists of four district kingdoms, each with a dialectic classification namely, Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme. The Ndoki of the Igbo stock on the north, the Efik/Ibibios and Andoni/Opobo on the west, Bonny and Okirik group on the southeast and Ikwerre group on the north-west are Ogoni neighbours (Ikoru, 1983). The Ogonis occupy an area of 400 square miles and number an estimated 700,000. The population density of about 1,250 persons per square mile is among the highest in any rural area of the world (Mitee, 2000). The people have enormous natural resources, chief among them is 'crude oil'.

Vulture is the name given to birds that are seen scavenging on carcasses of dead animals and other dirty food items. It is a bald-headed bird devoid of normal feathers. Vultures have been observed to lunch their bodies and tuck in their heads in the cold, and open their wings and stretch their necks in the heat (Ward, et al 2008).

Vultures roost in undisturbed stands of tall trees as well as structures. Roost sites are often in rural suburbs, close to water and next to obstructions that generate updrafts of air to help the flock take flight in the early morning. Sometimes vultures gathered at market squares, homes, community squares where sacrifices are offered and at road kill or upon battle fields. A gathering of group of vultures is called a wake, committee or venue. The wake is reserved for a group of vultures that are feeding, while committee or venue refers to vultures resting in trees (Galvan, 2004).

### **Vulture Social Behaviour**

African vultures are monogamous, staying with their mates for many years, all year round. They feed their young for as many as eight months after fledging and maintain strong social bonds with their families throughout their lives. They use communal roost as a meeting place where foraging groups can assemble and adults can reconvene with their young. Vultures aggressively prevent non-relatives from joining them at roosts or following them to food sources. They attack each other by pecking, biting, wing-pummelling and foot-grappling.

### **Vulture Feeding**

Vultures rarely attack healthy animals but may kill the wounded or sick. When a carcass has too thick a hide for its beak to open, it waits for a larger scavenger to eat first (Vulture facts in Wikipedia, 2011). They feed on the remains of dead animals and are never too fussy about what is left. Vultures have keen eyesight. It is believed they are

able to spot a three-foot carcass from four miles away on the open plains. Group of vultures are often seen circling prey from the sky above. This draws the attention of other vultures that then join in. Vultures are known to strip meat, skin and even feather, leaving only the skeleton of the animal remaining. These birds do not carry food to their young in their talons but disgorge it from their crops. Vulture stomach acid is exceptionally corrosive, allowing them to safely digest putrid carcasses infected with toxin, and bacteria that would be lethal to other scavengers. Vultures often vomit when threatened or approached by attackers as a way of defense or deliberate distraction to predator in order to escape it (Caryl, 2000).

### **Vulture Significance in Ogoni Culture**

Before the advent of Christianity and western education the people of Ogoni have regarded vulture as beneficial birds and tolerated them around home, and community shrines and market squares because of their spiritual and social relevance.

Vultures are believed to be agents of the gods, spirit and ancestors that must gather and eat the ritual meals before the living human beings could freely eat them. The blood of sacrificial animal, fowl, tortoise, pieces of fish, and yam are used during traditional burial, marriage and other ceremonies. These ritual items are gathered and kept in the open at the entrance of home or community shrines for the vultures. The refusal of vultures to arrive during ritual ceremonies to eat ritual meal presented to them by the officiating priests and elders is considered signs of rejection of the whole rituals by the gods, spirits and ancestors.

In such cases inquiries are made immediately through diviners to know the wishes of the gods, spirits and ancestors. When their demands are known, necessary sacrifices, including drinks (palm wine and local dry gin) animal (goat), fowl tortoise, rack of fish are presented by the officiating priest and elders with prayers and libation of drink to appease the gods, spirits and ancestors. Ogoni traditional ritual ceremonies are usually kept on hold until vultures arrive and eat the meals. In case, vultures delay to arrive, people are encouraged by the priests and elders to clap hands calling vultures to come and eat. The arrival of vultures is usually greeted with drumming, singing and shooting of canon gun to mark the opening of the ritual ceremonies (Saale, 1989).

In earliest times, vultures were not threatened, and killed by the Ogoni people neither do the people eat vultures as meat because of their beliefs. Road killed vultures were covered with earth by people who in some cases gathered to find out the cause of death. It became an Ogoni custom and tradition for any person who kill vulture to bury it the same way the Ogoni bury their dead.

Ogoni people believe and use vulture to symbolize the presence and nearness of the gods, spirits and ancestor, re-enforces African indigenous beliefs in totem and also, the people use of natural phenomena and objects to explain, predict and control some

incomprehensible realities. Ngaage (2012) observed that man unites with nature in Ogoni cosmology transcending personal characteristics.

The nature and characteristic of vulture are used to explain both the spiritual and social relations that exist between the gods, spirits and ancestors and man on the one hand and the relationship between man and his fellow man. Ogonis gather themselves, the same way vultures do using the communal roost as a meeting place where foraging groups can assemble and adults can reconvene with their young and committees formed and assigned duties to perform for the common good of the group. This explains why market squares, home and community squares are used as shrines and as well as traditional meeting venues in Ogoni land. Tall trees that are allowed by people at market squares, home and community squares and shrines in Africa not only reinforces indigenous belief in pantheism but become committee, referring to vultures resting place in trees. Human being gathered where vultures gather and commune together in the same manner like vulture in most African societies.

The manner in which vultures stay with their mates for many years, all year round. How they feed their young for many months after birth and maintain strong social bonds with their families throughout their lives. How they roost in large flocks especially in the evening; explain the origin, growth and development of African (Ogoni) social relations. Also, the same manner in which the successful foragers (vultures) locate food by following the roost mates to carcasses. The way vultures aggressively prevent nonrelatives from joining them at roost or following them to food sources; the way vultures attack each other by pecking, biting, wing-pummelling and foot-grappling and vultures feeding habit are used to describe unethical human eating, selfish and greedy life styles in Ogoni culture.

Vultures are voracious, until their crops bulge and sit, they hardly carry food even to their young. They often vomit on their attackers as a deliberate defense and their vomited meal residue distracts predator, allowing them to escape. Vultures rarely attack healthy and strong animals but kill the wounded or sick. They wait for a larger scavenger to kill, eat and open the animals before they can gather around the carcasses and eat.

According to Ogoni tradition, individuals or groups whose life style resemble vultures are nicknamed 'Dere' or 'Gbo Dere'. This derogatory name is used to teach and articulate ethics in Ogoni culture. People are discouraged from behaving unethically in matters concerning the common good-group interest. Although, the beliefs and attitude of Ogoni people have changed in modern times, they still literary use the derogatory term, 'Dere', meaning vulture or 'Gbo Dere', meaning group of vultures to describe unethical human behaviours. In pre-modern Ogoni, the literary use of 'Dere' and 'Gbo Dere' were understood and applied as mere emotive words to arouse in the individual or group of Ogonis a sense of belonging and the need for conformity to societal norms.

But in the modern Ogoni, the same words, ‘Dere’ and ‘Gbo Dere’ are conceived and understood by many Ogonis who acquire western education not only as derogatory but stigmatization on one’s putative status in a civilized society. This has become the bane of social conflict in Ogoniland (Saale, 2008).

### **Impact of Group of Vultures (Gbo Dere) in Ogoni Culture**

Misinterpretations and inappropriate usage of vulture to literary refer to human beings is not only derogatory but a source of many social conflicts among the Ogonis. Vulture’s bald head, devoid of normal feathers, although it has been historically believed to help keep the bird’s head clean when feeding is used in Ogoni to describe an ugly man and woman.

Vulture, a name given to group of scavenging birds of prey is used to describe group of persons who scavenges, searching for opportunities among exploited and cheated population for their means of survival even to the detriment of the masses they have considered as prey. Vulture rarely attack healthy animals but may kill the wounded or sick. When a carcass has too thick a hide for its break to open, it waits for a larger scavenger to eat first. Vulture characteristics are used also to describe some Ogonis who rarely take risk, bravely confront and battle against injustice deprivation, exploitation and marginalization; but would like to wait for others to risk their lives and even die in fighting for community inheritance before they will feed on the benefits of others struggles.

The appearances of vultures at battle fields and venues of ceremonies, searching for carcasses and leftover food items to feed on are equally used to describe some lazy Ogonis seen at every occasion even as uninvited guests just to look for food to eat, wine to drink and rumours to peddle. A group of vultures are called a committee, referring to vultures resting in trees and a wake reserved for a group of vultures that are feeding. The gathering of two or more Ogonis at a market place, community squares or shrines usually located under tall trees for meetings to discuss matters concerning their selfish interest instead of the public good is referred to in Ogoni culture as gathering of ‘Gbo Dere’ meaning gathering of vultures; while the sharing of meal by such a group of Ogonis is called ‘Denu Gbo Dere’ meaning eating together of group of vultures.

The symbolism and literary usage of vulture in Ogoni culture is as old as Ogoni tradition. But its adoption and application by the parties in Ogoni survival struggles in the 21st century made it a spark of a social conflict. In the Ogoni internal crises of 1994 during the movement for the survival of Ogoni people complaints of injustice, long neglect, exploration and exploitation of resources and environmental degradation against both the Federal Government of Nigeria and multinational oil companies; some Ogoni activists used the term ‘Gbo Dere’, literary meaning, group of vultures to identify and describe the behavior of some pro-government Ogoni elites and chiefs.

Conflict arose as these pro-government Ogoni elites and chiefs who understood the connotative meanings of vulture in the Ogoni culture, felt that its usage by some Ogoni activists to describe them and their gatherings was out of context, while its content were not only derogatory but stigmatization of their personalities and status in society. It was in the middle of these conflicts especially, the 1994 crises following the election of representatives from Ogoni to the constitutional conference, that the military junta of Sani Abacha deployed armed policemen and soldiers to Ogoni and under its internal peace keeping task force arrangement led by Major Paul Okuntimo.

On the 21st May 1994, four prominent Ogoni chiefs namely; Edward Kobani, Albert Bade, and the two sons of Orage all of the Gokana speaking group of Ogoni were killed at Giokoo. The chiefs and leaders from the Gokana kingdom were at a meeting in preparation for the delegate election to the constitutional conference when the killing occurred. The Federal Government alleged that the Mosop leaders, Ken Saro Wiwa and others invited angry mob (youth) against the chiefs and leaders gathering in Gokana by calling such a leadership forum 'Boganalo Gbo Dere' meaning gathering of vultures in Ogoni language.

### Conclusion

In this study, we have explained how vulture with a stiffened odour, dirty feeding habit and bald head bird gain prominent in the Ogoni culture because of its spiritual and social significance. Also, the study explains how the misinterpretation and inappropriate usage of the term vulture to literary refer to human behaviour in Ogoni culture is not only derogatory and stigmatizing but capable of sparking social conflict. The 1994 Ogoni internal crisis which escalation is traceable to the use of the term 'Gbo Dere' and 'Boganalo Denu Gbo Dere' meaning gathering and feasting of group of vultures by some Mosop activists to identify the pro-government Ogoni chiefs and elites. The Ogoni internal and external conflicts are used as an example of social conflict caused by negative use of the term vulture. Ogoni people do not kill and eat vultures but they venerate them as spiritual bird, regarding and tolerating vultures as representing Ogoni ancestors.

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